Felipe Hernandez
The Tiger of San Jose

By John Pusateri

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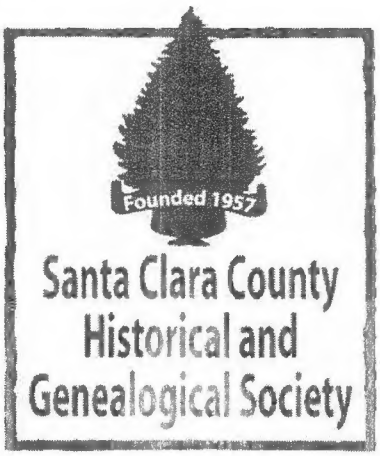
Notes:

- Original in possession of the Santa Clara County Archives, San Jose, California
- Scanned by the Santa Clara Historical and Genealogical Society



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FELIPE HERNANDEZ - THE TIGER OF SAN JOSE

In the late 50's, after Joaquin Murrieta's reign of terror and before Tiburcio Vasquez had earned the name of the "Gentleman Highway Robber", there appeared in Santa Clara County Felipe Hernandez, a Mexican with a keen and piercing eye. He was a most desperate character and soon the county rang with horrible tales of his deeds. He was quickly tracked down by the law and confined in the county jail. He was tried for several murders. One was the killing of Carobine at Alviso.

Hernandez was sentenced to the State Prison for life, but was pardoned by Governor Weller. Gaining his freedom, Felipe resumed his acts of lawlessness by murdering John Bee, a citizen of San Jose. The outlaw was again run down, captured and lodged in the county jail. It was while being held here that Hernandez committed one of the most desperate deeds that has ever been recorded in San Jose.

Felipe Hernandez was thirty years old, rather fine looking, five feet eight inches tall, weighing one hundred and fifty pounds and possessing the strength and agility of a tiger. It was while waiting execution (Friday, October 24, 1862,) that this deed was perpetrated, a deed that startled the whole county.

Martin J. Roohan, county jailer, was a large, powerfully built man, sixty-three years of age, possessing immense strength and unflinching courage. He had had much experience in handling and managing criminals, and was confident of his ability and nerve in any emergency.

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On Thursday, October 23, the eve of Hernandez's execution, jailer Roohan went to the outlaw's cell to bring him food, accompanied by his attendant, an imbecilic old Mexican. The cell was lined with boiler iron, and was used exclusively for condemned prisoners, or such as were awaiting trial for capital offenses. This cell Felipe occupied alone.

Hernandez, up to several days before the date set for his execution, smoked cigarettes indifferently, and manifested little concern with his fate. Suddenly he changed his tactics and successfully played the penitent. Roohan found him many times on his knees, with cross before him and head bowed as if in deep, silent prayer. By these deceptive means he threw the jailer off his guard.

As Roohan ordered his waiter to pass the food to Hernandez, the outlaw, with the speed of thought, hurled the old Mexican aside and sprang for jailer Roohan who was standing in the door leading into the corridor, grabbing him about the waist, at the same time pulling out the knife Roohan carried on his belt.

A terrific struggle ensued. Hernandez, his left arm firmly encircling Roohan around the waist, while the jailer tried desperately to reach for his pistol, applied the knife to Roohan's body with diabolic fury. The first stroke caught the jailer's throat, leaving a gaping wound. Blood flowed profusely, and Roohan began to show signs of weakening. Other prisoners confined in adjoining cells for minor offenses, watched the death struggle without being able to give the least assistance to either of the

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two men. The Mexican serving as Roohan's attendant, and perhaps the one person that might have rendered Roohan assistance, fled to the end of the corridor and watched wide-eyed.

The outlaw hugged the jailer closely. With all to gain and nothing to lose, he was a match for anything human. Though riveted upon his ankles were immense iron shackles, weighing 100 pounds, they were, according to the prisoners' statements after the fight, of no apparent weight to him. He had wound them with cloth and strapped them to his limbs in a way to be of as little inconvenience as possible.

Jailer Roohan was brought to his knees, desperately came up fighting, and trying tow ard off the deadly knife strokes. Many times already the blade had entered his chest and body. He tried to overpower his wily foe, but to no avail -- the knife had taken its toll. Weakly he sank upon his knees. The outlaw saw him going down for the last time in defeat and struck another blow, the blade piercing Roohan's heart.

Hernandez warned the other prisoners that if they made an outcry the same fate would befall them. This was about three o'clock in the afternoon.

With keys taken from the dead jailer, the outlaw opened the door of one of the cells and let another Mexican out. The two then went to the jailer's private room, where they found files and old chisels necessary to release the shackles from Hernandez's ankles. About two o'clock the following morning (Friday, October

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24, 1862), according to witnesses, the filing and hammering ceased. The desparadoes then made their escape, taking with them two revolvers, and over $800.00, which Martin J. Roohan was known to have in his possession.

Felipe Hernandez left Santa Clara County. He was never found despite a large reward offered for his capture, dead or alive. Some time later it was reported that he was killed near the Colorado River in a fight with his associates.

CONSULTANT:

San Jose Mercury-Herald, Newspaper, October 30, 1862